

1980

Christiane Grosz: Scherben. Gedichte

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sudden and awkwardly handled political awakening is not developed; rather, the novel goes on to introduce another theme almost obligatory in the GDR works set before the Berlin wall: the foray into the Western zone and the discovery that its society is based on gain. Theo's return to his boyhood home at the end of the novel leads him to the insight that time does not stand still, and to the thought "Wer nichts macht aus seinem Leben, haust im Keller der alten Schmiede, Untermieter beim Tod." His insight is not unique enough to justify recounting his adventures, and the reader is left wondering whether Theo will make any significant contributions to the new GDR society. Keller der alten Schmiede is sometimes readable because of the refreshing dialogue and original characters, but it is not a major contribution to GDR literature.

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Scherben: Gedichte. Von Christiane Grosz.
Edition Neue Texte. Berlin and Weimar:
Aufbau Verlag, 1978. 99 Seiten. 4,50 M.

Coffee pots with lids and handles: the daily output (and companions) of the ceramist. "Hier ein Deckel ohne Dose," and maybe there a pot in search of a lid: disorder born of incompleteness. Incompleteness the result of destruction. A lid is smashed. A marriage is broken.

The poet's artistic freedom is squelched in a liaison weak on love, "die Liebe klein, geflohn." The dissolution is accomplished all too rationally: "Dir den Sessel/Mir den Kessel...Für dich Tschai-kowski/ Für mich Bobrowski" ("Aufteilvers"). Along with conflicting feelings of emptiness, relief, hate, and jealousy, a burden of guilt remains. "Und das Kind?" As freedom is gained, new fetters take shape: "Betten deine/Ketten meine."

A succession of outlets involving the theater, graphics, writing, and ceramics outline a start-and-stop existence in the not always so "free" arts. Her life, fragmented, resembles a collection of potscherds. But from the broken pieces and incomplete sets will come new sources of creativity.

Each new start in life is accomplished with the stripping away of a former self; "Unter mir der Fluß führt/alle meine Felle, die davon/ geschwommen sind." In the mill that is the artistic process, heavy hammers "...münzen/meine Felle um in eine/ neue Währung." Poems emerge from life's experiences, even (especially!) the painful ones; art is relentless, "Ohne Schonung," but it is the path she must pursue: "Mein Weg/schmal und weiß/ist aus Papier." Christiane Grosz evinces compassion for the helpless, be they children, potters' apprentices, or old people, yet she scoffs at shallow sentimentality. In a collection as autobiographically oriented as Scherben, there is a risk of the poet's taking herself too seriously, of becoming melodramatic. Rarely is this a problem here. If there is a tinge of bitterness, there is also a reservoir of humor and self-irony ("Tonputtel").

Now and then a clever line at the end of a poem suggests the possibility that the poem was created in order to feature it; "Aber/geht ihr für mich durchs Feuer." ("Lieblich auf meine Töpfe"); but that is hardly a serious criticism. It is rather to be hoped that the poet will further develop her obvious talent for the epigram. The nature poems are concise, straightforward, vivid in their imagery, often beautiful. That they are interspersed among the more unabashedly "personal" poems does not detract from, but rather heightens the autobiographical quality of the work: the poet strives to establish a sense of order and finds comfort in the regularity of the recurring seasons and (Christian) holidays.

Scherben works as a collection partly because of the fruitful tension between the desire to be free to break with the past, to begin new lives (Felle--one is reminded of the image "häuten"), and the need for order and regularity. It is impossible to maintain perfect equilibrium. On the one hand, "Ordnung" can tyrannize: "vierfüßige Jamben,/wollen sich überall einmischen/ und endlich Ordnung in die/geordnete Unordnung bringen" ("Angsttraum"). On the other hand, freedom is seldom really absolute "Ich werde dich verlassen/und nicht von dir gehn." The new beginnings are not to be seen as complete breaks from the past; "Fühl dich nie/wie neu geboren. /Neu geboren du nicht."

In summary, this first published collection by the thirty-six-year-old poet/potter (individual works have appeared in anthologies and periodicals since 1970) reveals a great deal about a private struggle for freedom and dignity.

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Märkische Forschungen. By Günther de Bruyn. Halle-Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1978. 167 pages. 6,50 M.

In his latest work Günther de Bruyn presents the reader with an arresting tale of personal moral courage and professional integrity. The hero of the story is Ernst Pötsch, a somewhat naive country teacher, who becomes entangled in a web of artificiality and deceit woven by his urbane counterpart Winfried Menzel. While it is true that both men share a common interest--the obscure revolutionary poet Max von Schwedenow--all similarity between the two men ends here. Pötsch is the unpretentious local expert moved by a genuine urge to know the truth about his small domain. As for publishing his views, Pötsch has apparently long since reached the conclusion, "daß zu schreiben sich nur lohne, was außer ihm niemand wüßte (29)." His foray into the world of "serious" scholarship, prompted by a chance meeting with his longtime idol Menzel, pits him against a man motivated almost exclusively by a selfish desire for fame and intent upon securing a place in the history of Schwedenow scholarship, regardless of the cost to himself in terms of ethical integrity.

In the course of their association, Pötsch becomes obsessed with the need to correct what he considers an error in Menzel's monumental work on Schwedenow. In his uncompromising search for truth, Pötsch throws away his chance for a prestigious career as Menzel's colleague. Menzel, in contrast, prefers to suppress the truths which he finds objectionable, rather than

jeopardize his reputation as a scholar by casting doubt on the accuracy of his "definitive" monograph on Schwedenow. "Dir geht's um ein Phantom, das du, wie ich dich kenne, Wahrheit nennst," Menzel confesses. "Mir geht es um viel mehr: um Sein oder Nichtsein in Wissenschaft und Nachwelt (153)."

At the crux of the problem is the question of whether Schwedenow died an heroic death in 1813, as Menzel assumes, or whether he lived on as a government censor under the name of Maximilian von Massow in dutiful service to the system he had sought to overthrow, as Pötsch suggests. The title of Pötsch's study, "Suche nach einem Grab," thus assumes ironic and indeed tragic proportions, referring not only to Schwedenow's, i.e., Massow's grave, which Pötsch hopes to locate, but also to the truth Menzel wants forever buried. In the final analysis, then, it is the idea of truth and the validity of legitimate criticism which concerns the author and forms the heart of the drama unfolding between the two men--a drama skillfully underscored by the several theater images used by de Bruyn, from the "Vorspiel im Theater" with its intimations of Faust's unending pursuit of knowledge to the superficial poses assumed or the roles played by the various characters.

De Bruyn assembles a cast of supporting characters whose ideas and actions help put into perspective the central conflict between Pötsch and Menzel. And yet far from being mere types or shallow representations of abstract ideas, de Bruyn's characters are all living individuals with credible faults and virtues. Foremost among these is Menzel's assistant Brattke, a somewhat cynical, self-compromising man who has evidently learned to recognize the personal danger inherent in man's search for truth and who has acquiesced: "Moralischer Sieg und Selbstmord sind fast Synonyme (157)," he tells Pötsch, but it is an idea which Pötsch heroically refuses to acknowledge.